1B

Breast-baring women begin court battle

The seven plead innocent to indecent-exposure charge

By John O'Brien
Democrat and Chronicle

Seven women made their first court appearance yesterday in what they expect will be a "wrenching effort" to convince society that women should be able to bare their breasts in public.

But already they've convinced a few people that there's nothing wrong with a topless woman trying to get some sun, the women said yesterday. They were arrested Saturday at Cobbs Hill Park on violations of a state indecent-exposure law prohibiting women from being topless in public.

All pleaded innocent yesterday in City Court.

"The atmosphere at the park was not what we intended — it was very frightening," said Mary Lou Schloss, 38, referring to a group of about 100 people, many of them men, who heckled the protesters.

"But in that group of men, a few of them got some education. After we'd had our shirts off for a few minutes, I heard one man say, 'So what's the big deal?'" said Schloss, of 237 Vassar St. "That's exactly our point.

"Our bodies are normal. There's nothing obscene or sexual about it — unless you're the victim of a pornographic mind."

The women wanted to be arrested to challenge the law in court on the grounds that it discriminates against women because men are allowed to go topless in public.

They are basing their claim on a clause in the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, which says that laws cannot discriminate between the sexes without good reason.

City Judge Herman J. Walz assigned Assistant Public Defender Lawrence L. Kasperek to represent four of the

Breast-barers plead innocent

FROM PAGE 1B

women at their arraignments yesterday. The three others said they would represent themselves.

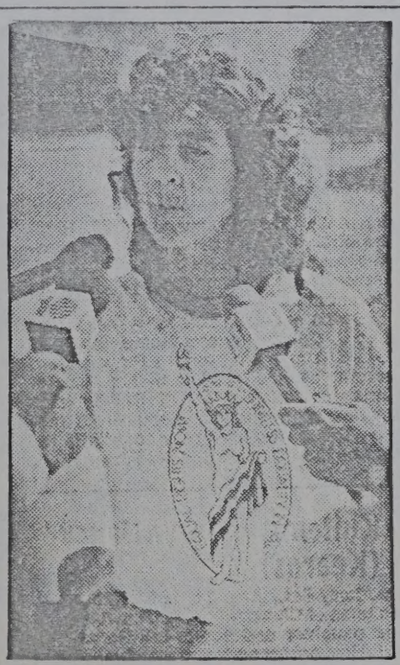
The women, some of whom wore T-shirts with a drawing of a topless Statue of Liberty to their arraignments, are also receiving legal assistance from David Moss, a Rochester lawyer who volunteered his help through the American Civil Liberties Union.

If convicted, they would face possible maximum sentences of 15 days in jail, a $250 fine, or both.

"I understand that these women may attempt to raise some constitutional issues," Walz said in court. "I take this issue very seriously."

One of the women arrested was Nikki Craft, a national feminist protester who has been arrested eight times in California in similar topless protests. She said she is pleased to have Walz hear their case.

"We've got a judge who knows issues of equality," said Craft, 36, of Oshkosh, Wis. "I knew it when he called us women, I knew it from the tone in his voice, and I knew it when he called it an important constitutional challenge."



Burr Lewis Democrat and Chronicle

Defendant Ramona Santorelli, wearing shirt with topless Statue of Liberty, before arraignment.